

# Children's Social Care

## Six Month Update Report on Independent Reviewing Officers for Children Looked After

The contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to quality assuring  
and improving services for children in care of Bromley Council

Update to January 2023

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## Purpose of Report

This is a six month update supplementing the Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Service for children looked after. The annual report is required in accordance with the *Children and Young Person's Act 2008* and provides a summary of the work undertaken by the IROs during the year. This report updates from the annual report noted at the PDS Committee in November 2022, on a six monthly cycle. The IROs combine their role with that of chairing Child Protection Conferences and are known by the title of Reviewing Officer. This report focuses primarily on the discharge of the IRO role and responsibilities. The terms Reviewing Officer (RO) and Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) are used interchangeably in the report. For data relating to Corporate Parenting, this report is recommended to be read in conjunction with the Corporate Parenting Annual report, authored by the Head of Service for Children Looked After and Leaving Care.

## Introduction

- 1.1 The appointment of an Independent Review Officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. In March 2010, the government issued new statutory guidance for local authorities and IROs on care planning and reviewing arrangements for looked after children as contained in *Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and Statutory Guidance*. This came into force from April 2011. The IRO handbook 2010 supplements this and provides guidance to IROs about how they should discharge their distinct responsibilities to children looked after.
- 1.2 The annual report is a management responsibility as set out in the IRO Handbook 2010, Chapter 7, Strategic and Management responsibilities where Section 7.11 states; "The manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting board. This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed".
- 1.3 Every parent wants the best for their child and as a corporate parent, Bromley Council is working to make sure that the aspirations for our children looked after are that they be healthy, safe and happy, do well at school, enjoy good relationships with their peers

and grow towards adulthood equipped to lead independent lives. This report should be read in conjunction with the annual Corporate Parenting report.

- 1.4 Each child has their own IRO from the time they become looked after. The IRO role is to offer support and challenge and advocacy, to be a critical friend in ensuring care planning is meeting the holistic needs of children within the timescales that children need, escalate issues that are adversely impacting on achieving good outcomes for children to the right level of the management structure, drive and champion plans for permanence, and monitor the performance of the local authority as a corporate parent. Above all, the IRO must make sure that children's wishes and feelings are given full consideration in relation to their care plans and the support being given to them by their social workers.
- 1.5 This report explores the local authority's responsibilities as outlined above.

## **2. Profile of the Independent Reviewing Service in Bromley**

- 2.1 The Reviewing Officers are placed within the Quality Improvement Service in the Children's Social Care Division of the Children, Families and Education Directorate, People Department. Reviewing Officers have a unique position within the Division in that they do not hold the case decision making responsibility or supervisory responsibilities with social workers and can therefore take an independent view of the service and care planning being provided for children.
- 2.2 The service is structured to be composed of 9.5 full time equivalent post and 1 full-time Fostering IRO (FIRO). The Reviewing Officers are managed by two Group Managers. The fostering IRO conducts the annual review of Bromley foster households to ensure they are meeting fostering standards and providing good parenting to our children living in our care. There is one Business Support Officer who leads on the administration of looked after reviews. The service has a consistent group of Reviewing Officers. Over the past twelve months the service has seen only one departure when a member of staff secured a promotion offer from another Local Authority. We continue to have a mix of permanent staff and agency staff filling our Reviewing Officer posts. Recruitment of permanent Reviewing Officers has become increasingly challenging since the Review of Children's Social Care was published, which proposed wide ranging changes to the job role. Of note, is that interest may soon

recover in this vital role as the recently published Government response to the Review of Children's Social Care has decided that the role will be reviewed and strengthened, although there is no further detail at this time of how this will be undertaken and what that strengthening of the IRO role will look like in practice.

- 2.3 There continues to be high support and challenge to Reviewing Officers to improve outcomes for children and make a real difference to their lives. The Reviewing Officers continue to challenge significant gaps in service provision for children but their capacity during the year to date has been significantly impacted by the levels of demand both in our child protection system and within our 'new normal' of numbers of children looked after. This impact has been recognised in our Quality Assurance work, and our mockinspection work has identified some key areas for our Reviewing Officers to focus on so that their tracking and challenge of the timeliness and quality of care planning for children can be best evidenced. A focus has remained on professional development in building knowledge, skills, and abilities of the IROs. The model of writing review minutes to the child or young person is fully embedded and will be revisited as part of a practice development programme the service is implementing having learned of the benefits of bitesize learning from colleagues in some of our other service areas.
- 2.4 Our Reviewing Officers have grown the leadership element of their role in running Task and Finish groups to lead on how the service improves reviews and the child-centred quality of the records and recommendations from reviews. Starters in the service receive a full two-week induction to support their skills in this aspect of their role and this involves role modelling and observation, which continues beyond this period. The service is strengthening knowledge of the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer and has delivered seminar style training to a cohort of newly qualified social workers and students. This has been expanded and is now available to all new starters (and colleagues who wish to engage with a refresher) on a quarterly basis. Further, a session has been delivered during the summer of 2022 to staff across the Department at a Getting to Excellence seminar.
- 2.5 Group Managers and the Head of Service have continued to extend the reach of the Quality Improvement Service through membership of the full range of decision-making panels, including Legal Gateway Panel, Placement Panel, Children in Need panel and the Permanency Panel. The service established a Child Protection Scrutiny Panel to seek to unblock children who had been subject to long term Child Protection Plans. This has been successful in reducing the duration of children with Child Protection

Plans. This will extend to thematic sessions which will include scrutiny of care planning and decision making where children with Child Protection Plans may become looked after to support the quality of decision making and permanence planning. The challenge for the service continues to be demonstrating consistently good and excellent work to support and challenge the Division to achieve the best and most timely outcomes possible for children and young people. A particular area of priority focus, underpinned by our quality assurance work, is to enhance the challenge and scrutiny of permanence planning during the early stages of children's journeys when they are received into care, and close collaborative work with our Safeguarding & Care Planning services will support this area for continuous improvement alongside a sharp focus on this aspect of the IRO role through developmental sessions with the ROs.

- 2.6 The team reflects the diversity of the looked after population in Bromley and requires that all IROs have the skills and ability to meet the needs of children from diverse communities.
- 2.7 Guidance from the IRO Handbook outlines that each IRO should have a caseload between 50 to 70 children. During the period of this report the IROs experienced a considerable increase in demand, a pattern reflected across our safeguarding system both locally and regionally. Numbers of children with Child Protection plans increased to 412 during September 2022 and we have in recent months managed this down to between 330 and 340 children. This has meant that our Reviewing Officers have had a high number of Initial and first Review Child Protection Conferences during the present year that has impacted on workloads. Having managed down our numbers of children with Child Protection plans, caseloads for our ROs are now an average of 53, which again reflects a healthy position from which to strengthen the role. Our ROs have worked very hard to maintain their footprint and tracking of care plans between reviews, but the increase in demand within our child protection system had a short term negative impact on performance. In this context and knowing ourselves well, our Reviewing Officers are working hard to find solutions to support best practice in a highly challenging environment and without additional resource to cope with this demand. We are pleased to have achieved at the time of writing performance of 99% of our reviews with children looked after throughout the reporting year held in timescale as at 30 January 2023. Our ROs are regularly visiting targeted young people between reviews and this has been positive for the young people concerned and positive feedback has been received. The visits are sometimes used as pre-review planning

with young people, or as a midway review and sometimes reviews are now able to be held in person. We know from our Quality Assurance work that we continue to have some stubborn areas to resolve, most notably our Reviewing Officers evidencing their challenge and scrutiny of permanency planning for children, especially at children's second looked after reviews, and being able to manage workload demand successfully in consistently evidencing their footprint and involvement in tracking the progress of children looked after between their reviews. It is evident that our ROs are holding a high number of reviews, with 834 reviews having taken place by the end of January 2023.

### **3. Corporate Parenting Board**

- 3.1 The Deputy Leader is the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and leads the Corporate Parenting Board. The purpose of the Corporate Parenting Board is to ensure the Council with its partners effectively discharges its responsibilities to all children and young people looked after and care leavers.
- 3.2 The Corporate Parenting Board is made up of senior officers of the Council, its partner agencies, members of the Living in Care Council (LinCC) and Change for Care Leavers (CfCL). The Board drives improvement in services through rigorous challenge and support. The Corporate Parenting Board is jointly chaired by the Deputy Leader of the Council, and Portfolio Holder for Education, Children and Families, and the Chair of LinCC.
- 3.3 As a Corporate Parent to all children and young people looked after and care leavers the Council and its partners must act as a responsible and good parent.
- 3.4 The Quality Improvement service has ambition to play a full part in the work of the Corporate Parenting Board and have active membership of each of the sub-groups that reflect the priority areas for development and improvement. The strategic areas the sub-groups are responsible for are Support and Stability, Health and Wellbeing, Education and Enjoyment, Transitions and Independence. The Quality Improvement service is working closely with our Living in Care Council and Change for Care Leavers to improve young people's participation in reviews through delivery of training and support for our Reviewing Officers. Our Reviewing Officers are ambitious to make their

reviews as child/young person centred as possible and are developing a model that will aim to embed young person leadership. Relationships have been built and a first training session was held in February 2022, with a further event planned in October 2022 to evaluate the impact of our young people's training and practice changes achieved by our Reviewing Officers. The plan is that this gathering together happens subsequently as an annual event. Lincc has reviewed this with the Head of Service and a proposal is currently being formulated that will further strengthen the impact of the training delivered by young people in shaping RO practice. However, in relation to how our Lincc members describe their experiences of reviews, this has significantly improved during the year as intended.

#### **4. Voice and Influence of Children and Young People**

- 4.1 While this report should be read in conjunction with the Corporate Parenting report, children and young people can participate in decisions and activities that shape and influence practice, policies and services that can impact on their lives. Bromley have a dedicated team to work directly with our children to support their inclusion in services, they are called the Active Involvement Team (AIT).
- 4.2 One of the key roles of Reviewing Officers is to offer a critical friend role if there is concern as to how the Local Authority is discharging its Corporate Parenting duties. This can involve raising themes and trends identified with the senior management team or it can on an individual child level see an issue of disagreement escalated for resolution. The Reviewing Officers regularly use the Dispute Resolution Protocol and have played an active role in supporting colleagues to improve placement stability for children and young people. Some challenge themes have centred around recognition where children should be accorded Section 20 status as children looked after within family arrangements, quality of care planning and permanence planning for children in relation to their identity, challenge of contact arrangements for children, quality of relationships with social workers and challenge where Connected Persons may not be demonstrating the commitment and standard of care that children would most benefit from and social workers wish to see. Our Reviewing Officers can become more robust in challenging around specific aspects of delay where children may be subject of care proceedings as this will both support and challenge social workers and their managers to evidence they are doing all they can to minimise and reduce delay with a focus on continued intervention. Our Reviewing Officers are also clear as to what they need to do to evidence more effective challenge of timely permanency planning and the



requirement that children have a permanence plan at the time of their second looked after review. Whilst at present a Group Manager attends the weekly Permanency Panel, we are looking at ways that ROs may be able to be freed to attend this in person to directly be involved in this important planning forum.

## **5. Action taken to improve IRO Performance**

### ***Supervision, Training and Development for IROs***

- 5.1 Reviewing Officers receive monthly supervision and have access to informal supervision as and when needed. Managers remain committed to ensuring the level of supervision and support to the IROs is of the highest standard. Group Managers regularly sample children's records to assess the quality and visibility of IRO support and challenge and have analysed individual areas for focus as required to drive improved practice and performance. The two-week induction period for new starters in the service also includes practice observation and feedback and designated 'Practice Fortnights' for practice observations have been successfully implemented with positive learning for our ROs. The Quality Assurance framework including Practice Assurance Stocktakes and our mock inspection during the autumn of 2022 have supported the identification of areas for improvement and the service is now giving a significant role in this process and auditing exercises. The service is aware of the need to achieve consistent tracking of the progress of children and evidence actions taken to support and challenge social workers and their managers if the RO is concerned about how any aspect of a child or young person's needs are being responded to, and where there is an indication of drift or delay that can be remedied to achieve timely and ambitious outcomes. The staff group has stabilised with only one leaver since December 2021. Although the service is yet to achieve its goal of being permanently staffed, our agency Reviewing Officers are deeply committed to our children and are choosing to work with us longer term. We have adjusted our rolling recruitment of permanent ROs to set timescales to encourage those interested in working with Bromley to submit applications to a deadline, but uncertainty as to the future of the role in Local Authorities has seriously impacted on the movement of Reviewing Officers between boroughs and those wishing to change into this role.
- 5.2 One of the Group Managers in the service is an active participant in the regional IRO managers network and was influential in establishing a standard university level training programme for Reviewing Officers. Our ROs have accessed this programme

via Edge Hill University from May to July 2022 and the aim is to provide a benchmark for ROs in the region to support improved practice as well as recruitment and retention. Reviewing Officers were enthused and have made pledges in relation to their practice in the role. The Reviewing Officers have received a bespoke Bromley Relationship Model training and this has supported them to now have a specific BRM embedding plan that directly connects across the core behaviours of our practice model in relation to the leadership and management aspect of their role. Our Reviewing Officers have delivered training to social work colleagues to support our model of safety planning with children and young people to support the launch of our 'My Safety Plan' model and this was well received by our colleagues in our Safeguarding and Care Planning services as part of their Bitesize learning programme in line with their service development plan. Our young people who are members of LinCC and CFCL delivered a further training session in October 2022 which was able to focus more on specific developmental aspects of the RO role.

- 5.3 The Reviewing Officers have a monthly half day team meeting and twice weekly Keeping in Touch meetings in which they share practice themes and trends with each other, including briefings on childcare issues and new developments in practice. Of note, the ROs had a bespoke session to build knowledge and expertise in relation to Early Permanence for children. The ROs enjoy access to all the same training and development opportunities made available for managers and social workers within the department and the service has taken on a greater role in leading learning and development around the quality of planning through delivery of Safety Plan training and a Group Manager delivering Child in Need planning training alongside another Practice Development manager. The service has delivered sessions around the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer, including a presentation to our Getting to Excellence seminar. The ROs are supporting the delivery of the Bright Spots survey presently being undertaken with our children looked after and are undertaking a surveys with children and young people to help receive as much feedback as possible directly from our children.
- 5.4 Review meeting records have been fully embedded and are written to the child or young person in sensitive language. Shadowing and learning from the best examples of the 'My Review Report' continues to be a key element of induction of new starters in the service as those with previous management or reviewing experience are not all familiar with our methodology when they start in the role with us. As noted above, all new permanent starters have been facilitated with a full two-week induction period and

a specific induction programme for all is being developed, while new locum starters are provided with a week-long induction including role modelling of chairing our meetings and practice observation. While Ofsted recognised in October 2021 that our approach to review meeting records is well embedded, the sustained demand of our high rise in children with Child Protection plans concerns our Reviewing Officers in relation to the impact this has on recording work, and we are re-visiting the quality of our review records to seek improvements in the child centred language used in these records. Our bespoke session with our Principal Social Worker around the Bromley Relationship Model is supporting this refreshment of striving for the highest quality records for children and young people and this will be revisited in a learning session as part of bitesize learning now being undertaken as part of our service development.

- 5.5 The ethos of the service is one of collaborative learning through the development of reflection sessions. Reviewing Officers have been committed to the goal of achieving excellence for children and young people and have attended where possible all Getting to Excellence seminars. Four task and finish groups among our Reviewing Officers have concluded with recommendations to progress in four key areas. For our children looked after, these groups have concentrated on our model for participation of children and young people in their reviews and the continuous improvement of IRO records and recommendations. This work is supported by the training from the members of LinCC, who report that there is now higher personal experience of leading review meetings and confidence that they understand that a review is their meeting that they fully participate in. The next step will be to find a method to get this message across to all our children, and Lincc may develop their guide for children and young people so that they can get the most possible out of their reviews.

### ***Midway reviews to track progress of plan***

- 5.6 Reviewing Officers are required to undertake midway reviews to track the progress of care plans between reviews and consult with children, young people and their carers where this is in a child's best interests. The greater visibility of Reviewing Officers involvement and providing a critical friend voice through their interventions and 'footprint' on children's social care records has been recognised through the undertaking of Practice Assurance Stocktakes of our services throughout 2021, but it is clear that workload demands during 2022-23 have impacted the consistent achievement of this. The challenge is to find smarter ways of capturing footprint and its impact to demonstrate consistency across the Reviewing Officer group in the

context of a further serious spike in demand upon the service with the further rise in the numbers of children with Child Protection plans. Our Data Mondays continue to happen, with a lunchtime keeping in touch meeting of the service exploring the weekly performance data. The support of a midweek provision by our colleagues in the Performance team combined with the introduction of a weekly meeting has helped the service to better manage our looked after child reviews throughout each week and achieve a current performance that is presently the highest Bromley has achieved in support of our ambitions to deliver excellence for our children.

### ***Quality Assurance and Monitoring***

- 5.7 IRO footprint on the children's and foster carers' files provides evidence of oversight and challenges. The CLA Review Preparation Checklist and Monitoring document is a tool to provide qualitative and quantitative oversight of care planning for each child in the pre-meeting (IRO and social worker meeting before the review) in advance of reviews that ROs undertake. These meetings help ensure statutory requirements have been completed or are in progress, confirm the care plan as well as identifying areas of good practice or where challenge is required. They also ensure that any contentious issues can be discussed more discretely so that these do not affect the quality of the child or young person's review meeting.
- 5.8 Practice has developed during the year so that these pre-meetings are part of the relational aspects of the Reviewing Officer's work with children and young people and will include the pre-review consultation with young people to ensure their full participation in the planning and delivery of their review meeting. This process is evolving alongside ROs visiting some of the young people for whom they fulfil the role. This practice will contribute to fuller participation of children and young people, forming part of feedback that will be sought from children and young people about every review so that the service can analyse feedback to help improve how it delivers the reviewing role. This tool also supports RO managers to track work with individual children in addition to identifying any trends across a specific team or service along with any practice issues.
- 5.9 We have sought feedback and participation from our young people in redesigning consultation papers and how best to send and receive these in advance of reviews, and a refreshed paper is being circulated for further discussion with our young people to launch before the end of October 2022. Feedback from young people tells us that

this aspect continues to be a priority area for our ROs and is not yet as developed as their improved experience of their reviews.

- 5.10 The Midway Monitoring Review provides an opportunity for the IRO to track and quality assure the progress and timeliness of planning for children. When required, challenge is raised using the Dispute Resolution Form. This form has been embedded in the new recording system. There has been significant delay in a performance report being written, but the functionality has been improved in our electronic file system and a report has now been written, indicating a total of 171 escalations on behalf of 128 children since the implementation of the Liquid Logic system but the performance reporting continues to require more work to be able to be used effectively for analytical purposes.
- 5.11 Escalations are always discussed between ROs and their line managers but it can be a challenge to receive timely responses from our colleague services. It remains evident from analysis that escalation about care planning from Reviewing Officers is more prevalent in the earlier stages of children's journeys through our services, particularly where children are experiencing delay in permanence being achieved where there can be extenuating circumstances such as delay caused in family court proceedings. This said, there can be significantly more challenge and this will need to be progressed as part of the service development in close collaboration with colleagues across other service areas. Where children have achieved permanence and receive a specialist service from our Children Looked After social workers, there is less identified need by ROs to escalate and so lower instances of Dispute Resolution.
- 5.12 While generally our quality assurance work tells us that IRO recommendations are often of a good standard, we are striving to ensure our work at all times is offering more than a check and balance about whether all due processes are being followed by our social workers, so that we are evidencing a role of champions of best quality planning including permanence planning and always challenging from an empathetic perspective where we feel an improved service can be given to children and young people. This is key in relation to a priority area for our ROs in strengthening the quality of permanency planning and the RO role within that goal. Whilst RO workloads provide challenge in achieving this goal, bespoke work is being undertaken with the ROs to support their working in smarter ways to fully evidence their visibility in this aspect.

### **Strengthen the quality of permanency planning for Looked After Children**

- 5.13 The Reviewing Officers have continued to ensure that children aged 0-5 years have 3 monthly Reviews rather than the statutory 6 monthly reviews. This practice is embedded and has focused planning by the local authority to reduce the delay for young children and has seen an improvement in the attainment of permanency through adoption and Special Guardianship Orders. Permanency planning for older children has strengthened but requires the RO to remain active to drive this in an ongoing manner until achieved. Reviewing Officers ensure their views are considered at Permanency Planning meetings through their Group Manager, who attends and, on some occasions, chairs this regular panel. This said, we recognise we need to do more, particularly in supporting and challenging our colleagues who are experiencing delays in the court system and ensuring that permanence is considered in detail from the very outset for children from their first looked after review, and this is a priority area for action within the service, underpinned by our Practice Assurance Stocktakes and mock inspection during 2022. Tools to support this aspect of RO practice are being developed in the service so that our ROs will consistently address this aspect of their role consistently to a high standard.

### **Children's participation in and satisfaction with Reviews**

- 5.14 Children participate in the review process in many ways. Children and young people are supported and encouraged to take part in the review of their care plan as they feel most comfortable with. Some like to attend the meeting for a brief period, whilst others prefer to take part in the whole meeting, while others do not attend but share their views with their RO, foster carer or keyworker. We have listened to our young people and all our ROs have written a personalised letter to all of our children and young people looked after to explain their role and tell our young people a little about themselves. This has been really appreciated by children and young people, who increasingly feel they have a better understanding of the role of their Independent Reviewing Officer and how this works alongside their key relationship with their social workers. We have worked with Lincc to take feedback on this communication and are adapting these letters based on the feedback. Further, our ROs will write to children and young people between reviews to remind them of their role and availability to represent their wishes and views.

- 5.15 Participation during the present reporting year saw 88% of children and young people take part in their reviews through a direct means of participation and we have seen an increased use of advocacy with 42 reviews supported by an advocate. We have a high number of reviews with children under 4 years old and a challenge for our ROs is to demonstrate their inclusion as participation data is not captured. Our data at this stage tells us that 97% of children and young people are participating through their preferred means in their reviews during the current year. Of young people, those who are aged 15-17 participate the least, and this is of concern given the significance of planning with young people as they become more independent and reach adulthood. One area the service is focusing on is the quality of final reviews before young people reach the age of 18. However, co-production with young people in this age group is significant for us to make lasting progress with, both from our Social Workers and our Reviewing Officers.
- 5.16 The service continues to distribute and promote consultation forms in advance of looked after reviews which is an additional method for feedback alongside the one-to-one conversations ROs have as part of conducting reviews. We know the forms are unpopular with young people and that they can be put off by some of the questions. It is clear from review records that ROs consult fully with children and young people in line with their wishes, and there is no evidence regionally that the most common paper or virtual form methods are successful for pre-review consultation where the forms are not followed up by anyone having a direct conversation with children and young people. With increase on demands on the service, our ROs have yet been unable to undertake the pre-consultation discussion themselves as we aim to, and this remains therefore a service development for implementation. Feedback from our young people is that they would hugely appreciate this contact with their ROs and so is a priority for the service.
- 5.17 Foster carers and parents are routinely invited to attend reviews or consult with ROs through a separate meeting if it is assessed to be unsafe, not in a child's best interests or contrary to a child's wishes and views to have a parent or foster carer present in their review meeting.

### ***Dispute Resolution Processes***

- 5.18 The Dispute Resolution Protocol (DRP) is embedded in our Liquid Logic recording system, but at present we are continuing to work with our Performance colleagues to

establish the most reliable report. Our data tells us that 171 DRPs have been raised concerning 128 children over the past year. Where our ROs can improve is the challenge made where practice is not timely or more can be done to progress care plans where children are subject of care proceedings or are within the pre-proceedings process. This correlates with our need to see our Reviewing Officers acting more assertively in the area of permanence plans for children, especially at the point of a child's second looked after review. Our ROs have a strength in identifying where the Local Authority may need to consider a 'private family arrangement' as a care placement, but the evidence base indicates they are more reticent to push for more intensive permanency planning when the Court is involved. The service is working on this as the role requires the confidence to push our colleagues as experts who will drive care plans forward alongside the Court system and legal processes, and is a key function of the IRO role in relation to the leadership and management aspect of it. It will be of significant benefit for the service and wider Children's Social Care department when regularised reporting around ROs use of DRP is widely available.

- 5.19 DRPs have continued to be resolved primarily at the informal or stage 1 levels by ROs alongside our team managers, and only three so far this year have been escalated to Head of Service level. However, analysis of impact does suggest that ROs could escalate more thematically to Heads of Service to inform their knowledge of any specific risks in their service areas. It remains evident that some ROs use the DRP more consistently than others and this remains a challenge to achieve consistency across the ROs. The role is complex regarding challenge, as culturally this can often be received negatively, and it is hoped that the review of the role proposed by the Government in its response to the review of Children's Social Care will lead to an intended strengthening of the IRO role.

### ***Impact of Staff Turnover***

- 5.20 Nationally recruitment of social workers is challenging, and Bromley have continued to strive for stability with the ambitious target of 90% or higher permanent social workers. We know that changes in social workers impacts on children and their relationships and can impact on care planning.
- 5.21 It is the RO Service's role to promote an optimum service to all our young people in line with national requirements. As with all posts that require a qualified and experienced social worker who has demonstrable management skills, the role is



challenging to recruit to. We know from young people that as well as stability of social worker, they value stability and consistency of Reviewing Officer. We have recruited locum cover increasingly with a focus on candidates whom we believe are most likely to convert to permanence, but it remains challenging to recruit to the dual role given the roles remain separated in most Local Authority areas in the region. We have achieved stability with only one leaver among our Reviewing Officers since December 2021. We have altered our strategy of a rolling advert to advertising at intervals with clear deadlines, to test whether this triggers an increase in application volumes and quality. Unfortunately, it does appear that the proposed wholesale changes to the role set out in the recently published review of Children's Social Care, we have since seen a void in permanent applications. This challenge is one that we will need to give more strategic consideration to but sits alongside what is a more pressing challenge in recruiting and retaining high quality social workers. We are interested in offering an alternative to team management internally and potentially an alternative career pathway to retain good staff in the borough, and a team manager is presently considering transfer to a FT Reviewing Officer role. This said, we are alert that this can then cause a recruitment gap elsewhere in the service.

## **Advocacy**

- 6.1 Independent advocacy to support children and young people with specific issues about their care plan or the service they are receiving is available to all our children. The service is provided by Advocacy for All. We would like to continue promoting increased use of advocacy by our children and the advocacy service has been more successful to date in working with children who are subject of Child Protection plans.

During the current reporting year, we have focused on increasing the quality of reporting from our advocacy service so we can better understand the reasons that young people have made use of advocacy, to better understand where we may be able to improve. The advocacy service has provided specific case study detail and also breaks down referrals by service area. From this information we can see that young people who wish to use an advocate for support at their looked after reviews are focussed on specific aspects of their care plans that they are dissatisfied with, for example their family contact arrangements. We continue to wish to see more use of advocacy by our children looked after and would welcome invitations by all Heads of Service to attend at service meetings to promote advocacy and answer questions from our social workers. Advocacy is discussed at every review and has a prominent page

on the website for children and young people. Our young people's awareness of advocacy has grown and our Reviewing Officers must ensure they always discuss advocacy and young people's entitlement to this at every review. We saw an increase to 42 advocacy referrals for our children looked after to the end of the 2021/22 period. We have recommissioned our advocacy service and have adjusted the service specifications to be more robust as to the reporting required to better suit our ability to analyse the impact of advocacy for our children looked after. A request has been made for specific case studies of how advocates have supported and had positive impact for care experienced young people who are leaving care.

- 6.2 The IROs routinely check that the children and young people know about the advocacy service and how it can support decisions about their lives. It continues to be a challenge to translate this promotion in to use of this service by our children but as we move forward we will ensure that they have the choices and options available to them. The improved data set will support this as referral reasons and sources can now be better analysed. In year data tells us that 42 children looked after have used the advocacy service. At this point, we have not seen any young people self-refer for advocacy, in part this may be positive but also may mean that young people continue to lack confidence or awareness of how advocacy can help and what it may mean for their valued relationships with their social workers. It may also be that our social workers listen well and respond to young people's wishes and views reliably which in turn prevents a need for an advocate to become involved, and the numbers correspond with a very low number of formal complaints made by our children looked after about the services they are receiving.

## **7 Progress of developments and key priorities for 2022/23**

- 7.1 *The Reviewing Service will achieve stability and increase permanent staff to the group. This stability will support the successful building of relationships with children and young people with new skills being learned directly from our young people themselves. The stability will also support the service to achieve its goal of all looked after reviews happening within timescale.*

This priority remains of vital significance for us in growing the service. We have been impacted by the significant increase in demand on the safeguarding aspect of our services and although we have struggled to recruit permanent staff, we have a supportive environment that has attracted high quality agency staff alongside our permanent staff who have formed a group that is committed to Bromley, our children

and their practice model. We retain our ambition to ensure all reviews are within timescale but also are meetings that address the aspects that our young people tell us are most important to them. Our continued work and support from our young people with our Reviewing Officers reflection, learning and development, is hugely valued across the service. We held a further learning session in the October half term and the aim is to come together annually with our young people to ensure we always know their experiences and views of whether our role is fulfilled at its best.

- 7.2 *The use of case escalation will continually demonstrate a curious and appreciative systems-based approach to contribute to learning across the services when we make mistakes, or our systems don't work as intended for children and young people. Case escalation will demonstrate support and robust challenge where necessary but will not focus on achieving set numbers at the expense of the quality of the escalation and its impact for a child.*

Case escalation is well embedded in the service, but we can continue to develop this to evidence key themes and trends from the ROs overview of our services. Most escalations are sensitive, systems based and are proportionate. It is harder to have impact where the ROs are raising issues that are perhaps consequences of the significant increase in demand across our safeguarding system but nonetheless necessary to shine light on areas where work with children and their families can be improved. We know that we can do more in relation to this aspect of our role and our escalations tell us that preparations for key statutory meetings are being adversely impacted by social workers workloads and that this can affect the quality of those meeting with children and their families. Our continuous learning and quality assurance work tells us that our ROs must take a more active and curious role around permanence planning between children's first and second looked after reviews, and this connects with a renewed focus on permanency planning across our system to ensure we always evidence the pathway and thinking made towards achieving permanence in the most timely way.

- 7.3 *The Reviewing service will be increasingly visible with its overview and tracking of the progress of care plans and participatory with colleagues as they develop plans to meet children's needs. Reviewing Officers will always consult with children and young people several weeks before their next review, this will be helped by a stable and consistent staff group that is therefore able to form relationships that will see young people look forward to their reviews as a space where they can influence and shape the service and support that they receive.*

Reviewing Officers work collaboratively with social workers and young people and there has been compliments made of ROs during the year for how they have promoted the voices of young people and managed sensitive reviews positively. We are working closely with members of LinCC and CFCL, commencing training for our ROs from the young people's perspective in February 2022 with a follow up half day session scheduled in October 2022. This will then become part of an annual rolling programme for Reviewing Officer learning and development. This has improved young people's experiences of reviews so that they can influence and shape the support that they receive. What we know from our quality assurance work is that our ROs are experiencing difficulties in consistently evidencing their footprint and work is being undertaken with them to ensure this happens through learning and development work.

7.4 *That a consistent and defined training and development package for Reviewing Officers be developed alongside a training inventory of all staff in the service.*

To progress this priority our service has led the development of IROs regionally accessing a university programme for IROs and our Reviewing Officers benefitted immensely from this course run by Edge Hill University, with pledges that are reviewed with them around changes to their practice. Our ROs are also sharing knowledge of the IRO role and remit across the Department and are presently scheduling sessions with each service area to refresh knowledge following a Getting to Excellence presentation during the summer of 2022. The service is devising a bespoke learning and development programme to address some practice themes arising from our intensive quality assurance work.

7.5 *We will have a clear sense of young people's experience of reviews and develop our methodologies for consultation, feedback and practice observation in a way that reflects the Bromley Relationship Model (BRM) and demonstrates our ambition to achieve excellence. We will analyse the feedback and demonstrate changes in how we practice and fulfil the reviewing role from this.*

We have developed our understanding of young people's experiences through our work alongside LinCC and we are very grateful that our Reviewing service was selected as a young people's priority. Our feedback methodology has been developed through Survey Monkey methodology and will see a quarterly analysis report completed by the Head of Service. Our refreshed consultation forms will have final overview from our young people before being launched in October 2022. We have had a bespoke session with our Principal Social Worker to explicitly agree a work plan for

our ROs to be able to strongly evidence our Bromley Relationship Model throughout their work in relation to the leadership and management aspect of their role.

- 7.6 *We will lead on improving the take up of advocacy support by children and young people, including the quality of data and analysis of the advocacy given by our commissioned service.*

We have developed the advocacy reporting to improve quality of analysis and there remains work to do to promote around all our services. The Head of Service now attends the quarterly meetings with our commissioned service and commissioning officers and our ROs are promoting at reviews. We can now see that our CLA service is identifying need in this area and actively referring young people for advocacy where social workers find themselves unable to resolve differences between their assessed views as to support that is in a child's best interests and the child's wishes.

## **8. Conclusion**

- 8.1 The Independent Reviewing Service continues to grow and evolve and demonstrate its footprint and impact. The significant increase in demand across our safeguarding system has impacted on the dual role fulfilled by our Reviewing Officers, but with stability and consistency now in the service, we are striving for solutions within our existing resource to work smartly to evidence all that our Reviewing Officers do. Learning and Development opportunities that are specific for our Reviewing Officers have been put in place and this contributes to our ROs feeling valued and having reflective space to make improvements to their practice. We know ourselves well and the areas that we need to continue to improve upon on behalf of our looked after children.
- 8.2 There remain challenges for the service to demonstrate good quality relationships with young people alongside the most effective challenge and support of our colleagues across the Children's Social Care department. This work will include continued strengthening of our collaborative working partnerships with all our colleague services to build a culture of appreciation and understanding of the unique role that Reviewing Officers hold within the Children's Social Care Department, and how this can be put to the most effective use. This will be underpinned by a regular training programme offered and has been supported by the Head of Service delivering a presentation to the Department about the IRO Handbook and the role of the IRO at one of our Getting to Excellence seminars.